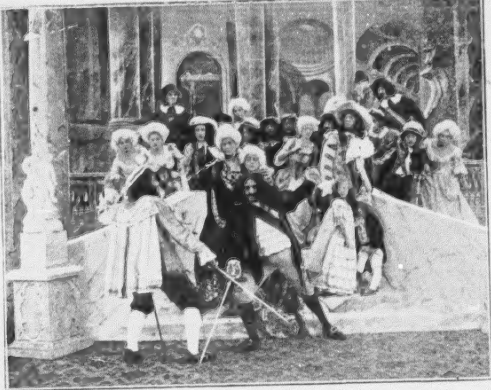


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THE DUKE'S MOTTO

"Staunch and True"



FRANCE, whose people are as changeable as the colors of the chameleon and as effervescent as the champagne the early monks first learned the art of making. Art, science, letters, romance, all have found ardent votaries here. Each in turn has held sway during different periods of her history. Our story is laid in the romantic period of the regency, while that Louis who made art his god and love a pastime was still a child.

Henri de Lagardere, the best sword-man in France, an adventurer, but according to the canons of his time a gentleman of honor, is our hero. While visiting a wine shop kept by Monsieur Peyrolles he overhears an agreement between an unscrupulous nobleman, Gonzague, and a party of hirelings to assassinate the Duke De Never and abduct his infant daughter, thus to pave the way to a dukedom for himself, he being the next in line as a relative of the Duke De Never. Lagardere, ever ready to fight on the weaker side, astonishes the plotters by spear- ing the incriminating document with the point of his sword and facing them all, seven against one. "You cowards! I'll just lock you in, then warn your intended victim, and when you come to do your dastardly work be well shriven, for the sword of De Lagardere will be pitted against you." To find the Duke De Never and warn him of Gonzague's intentions is the next move of Henri. He and the duke arrive at the castle as Gonzague, appears at a tower window with the duke's infant daughter. As De Lagardere seizes the child De Never and Gonzague engage each other. De Lagardere fights his way through the hirelings and reaches the top of the stairs leading from the castle yard to the street just as the treacherous Gonzague plunges his sword into the body of the doomed De Never. The dying father with a last effort calls to Henri to save his child. "Fear not, duke, your daughter is behind the sword of De Lagardere, who will not only protect her but will live to avenge her father's assassination." "Beware, Gonzague, for after the hirelings comes the master." Realizing that Gonzague will put a price on his head he eludes his pursuers, and mounted on a swift charger he escapes from France with the duke's infant daughter.

Eighteen years have elapsed since De Lagardere was banished through false evidence given at court by Gonzague, who has succeeded his murdered cousin to the dukedom, and who to make his position doubly sure has persuaded the duchess, Blanche's mother, to become his wife. The poor mother still grieves for her lost child whom she has been led to suppose was abducted by Henri De Lagardere after he had killed her husband.

Our next scene is the fencing room in Gonzague's castle, eighteen years later, and one of his spies has returned with the news that De Lagardere, his term of banishment having expired, is to return to France that day, bringing with him the daughter of the murdered duke, now a beautiful lady and deeply in love with her guardian and protector. Gonzague acquaints Peyrolles with the facts, with instructions to prevent De Lagardere from presenting to the Regent of France the docu-

ments taken from them eighteen years before. Peyrolles acts promptly and in the courtyard of his inn engages a band of hirelings to destroy De Lagardere, who arrives at the inn just as Peyrolles receives the note from Gonzague. De Lagardere sees them with their heads together and determines to get possession of the paper Peyrolles is reading to them. This he accomplishes by a clever ruse. He decides to out-pay Monsieur Peyrolles. He calls the band together and boldly announces that he is going to outbid their master. "A bag of gold to each of you. Now I'll help you to earn the single bag he offers."

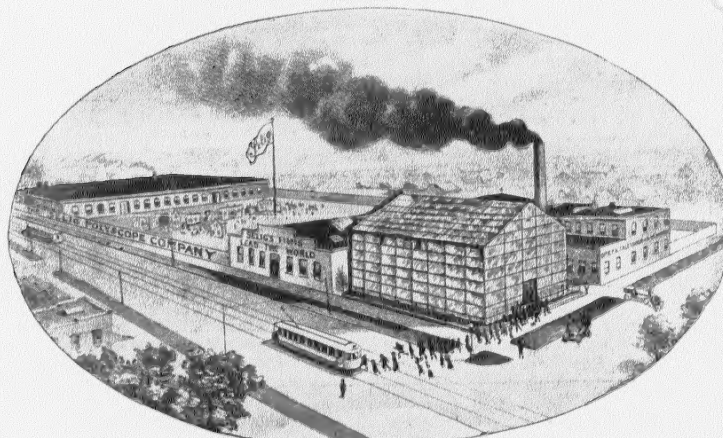
"When he returns, say I have gone to the Bridge of Sighs, in the grounds of my ancestors. He will follow in his chair, you are to meet me and apparently by the force of your numbers, overcome and slay me. He will be too cowardly to be present during the unequal struggle, and when he returns, will no doubt recommend a stone for my feet and eight feet of water for my final resting place, then we will turn the tables on Monsieur Peyrolles." We see the astounded innkeeper meet the fate he has planned for De Lagardere. Blanche grows anxious over Henri's long absence, inquires of the gateman at the inn, the direction Henri has taken, and follows him. He reassures her, places her in a sedan chair, and escorts her to his own home. He dismisses the men, "You have served me well. May we meet again! and now dear Blanche, await me here. I go to perfect arrangements, and tonight at the Regents ball, you shall meet your mother." The hunchback has been spying on De Lagardere, and no sooner is he left alone with Blanche, than Gonzague, attended by a dozen henchmen, rushes in, overpowers De Lagardere, takes the half fainting girl and quickly lodges his prisoners within the walls of his own castle. The lovers are separated, Henri is taken to the fencing room and is left with the hunchback as his jailer; Gonzague with his court of revelers vie with each other in heaping insults on the helpless girl. The duke dismisses his retinue, and the profligate, who has been drinking heavily, forces his odious attentions on the now desperate Blanche. But help is at hand. De Lagardere left alone with the hunchback, sees a way to free himself. He places his back to a stand of inverted swords, and while bandying words with his captor, saws the bonds that tie his hands. Once free, he leaps for his sword that the hunchback has carelessly left on a bench, and armed, faces his tormentor. The hunchback who in earlier days had been a fencing master, eyes Henri disdainfully and says: "Fool! I gave you your first lesson." De Lagardere replies, "And Heaven willing, I will give you your last!" Their bright blades flash fire, but the combat is short, De Lagardere the victor. His quick mind perceives a way out of his present difficulties. He removes the garments from the hunchback, and quickly arrays himself in them. A casual observer would never notice the difference, so closely has this dashing cavalier assumed the form and manner of the hunchback, whose place in the castle he has determined to take. He arrives in time to put an end to Gonzague's unwelcome attentions to Blanche, and insinuatingly suggests that he be allowed to pay his court to the fair prisoner. Gonzague, his brain befogged with drink, is pleased with the suggestion. He recalls his companions and informs them of the hunchback's ambitious desire. "A joyous revenge gentlemen! We will marry the duke's daughter to the crook back master. On with thy wooing!" De Lagardere requests them to retire beyond hearing and watch. He then quickly whispers to

Blanche his plan. "Appear to be charmed by my advances." She gladly consents and the half drunk courtiers are amazed to see the hunchback by a few weird passes and the seeming exercise of supernatural power gain complete control of the maiden who now nestles fondly in his arms. "Egad! Gentlemen, the mis-shaped one has conquered!" The household priest has been summoned and quickly joins them in marriage. De Lagardere evades the proffered congratulations of the duke and his courtiers and retires from their presence.

The discovery of the lifeless body of the real hunchback sobers Gonzague and he appears at the Regents ball. But too late, De Lagardere has restored Blanche to her mother and placed the proof of the rascally duke's crime in the hands of the Regent. Confronted with the evidence of his guilt he tries to escape, but De Lagardere's oath is unfulfilled. He craves permission of the Regent the privilege of crossing swords with the assassin of Blanche's father.

Our closing scene takes place in the courtyard of the ruined castle of the murdered De Never. Face to face at last! The masterly swordsmanship of Lagardere soon proves superior to the blind rage of his adversary, and the assassin of the last of the De Nevers falls before the avenging arm of Henri De Lagardere. "I have kept my oath! After the hirelings comes the master!"

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